



# what's up?

## talking with & listening to teens

### INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

#### What's it all about?

Communication is the cornerstone of our relationships with teens—be they our children, students, neighbors, clients or patients. Creating safe, open and honest channels of communication help us share information and hear what a teen thinks or needs. Because adolescence is a time of developing personal identity, testing boundaries and increasing independence from family, communication can sometimes be argumentative and unsatisfying. Time is another factor—teens and adults are spending more time working, watching TV or using the computer, reducing the opportunity for conversations. Meal times are still one of the main opportunities for parents to talk and listen to their teens.

#### What are the details?

- Not having enough time together with their parents is a top concern among teens. Parents are more concerned about outside threats, such as drugs.

According to the 2002 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey:

- About 80% of 8th and 10th graders report that their parents ask if they've gotten their homework done.
- More than 8 out of 10 adolescents say their parents ask them where they will be going and with whom most or all of the time.
- Over 80% of 6th graders, but only about 60% of 12th graders say their parents tell them often or always that they are proud of them.
- About 15% of 8th graders, 20% of 10th graders and 30% of 12th graders report rarely or never eating dinner with their family.

#### Why does it matter?

Communication helps teens:

- Feel cared for and loved.
- Believe they matter and are important to you.
- Feel safe and not alone with their worries.
- Learn how to tell what they feel and need.
- Learn how to talk openly.

#### Keep talking!

Start talking and keep talking! Begin with easier topics like sports, the weather, media (music, videos, games, the Internet), school, friends. Then you can move on to more difficult topics.

There are some good reasons to keep talking. For example, studies indicate that clear, strong messages from parents to teens about sex are critical, yet parents report it is one of the most difficult things for them to do. So practice with easier subjects.

Before you tackle tough subjects, do your research. The Washington State Department of Health "What's Up?" series can be a start!



## TALKING WITH AND LISTENING TO TEENS

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#### What can I do?

- Start early—talk to children throughout their entire lives.
- Be available—set aside enough time to deal with the subject at hand.
- Don't let the TV, telephone or other distractions interrupt.
- Eat dinner together as a family as often as possible.
- Engage adolescents with non-threatening questions.
- Avoid “why” questions that put adolescents on the defensive.
- Ask your teen's permission first if you want to start a discussion.
- Be a good listener.
- Recognize and thank him or her for trusting you to listen.
- Listen for tone as well as words. Watch body language.
- Encourage teens to express their feelings.
- Be ready to hear opinions you may not agree with.
- Discuss problems in the news as a discussion starter.
- Encourage teens to think through the issues out loud without challenging their point of view.
- Resist the urge to lecture or nag.
- Validate what you can when you listen. There will be opportunities for dissent later.
- Be a role model for decision-making strategies, such as defining the problem and looking at the pros and cons
- Ask questions about their ideas for solutions—don't always give answers.
- Answer questions when asked but don't pretend you know all the answers and admit when you are wrong.
- Let teens know when you have to go to other sources for information and then follow up.
- Be a role model for good communications with others.

#### Is it verbal abuse?

Negative communications can be verbal abuse when you resort to:

- Name calling
- Frequent criticism
- Blaming
- Violating a teen's boundaries
- Yelling
- Threatening to hurt a teen
- Long silence (hours or days)

Sometimes adults are silent because they don't know what to say, they are afraid they will say something that makes matters worse, or they are unable to communicate due to their own issues and problems.

Some adults never learned how to be healthy communicators. Some techniques can help:

- Take a few deep breaths.
- Wait 5 minutes before talking to a teen if you are angry or in the wrong frame of mind.
- Try to find words to label your feelings.
- Say it to yourself or write it down.
- Share your feelings with another adult.
- Focus on the present.

**hot  
links!**

Washington State Department of Health  
DOH Pub 910-125 11/2003  
[www.doh.wa.gov](http://www.doh.wa.gov)

Resources listed here are provided as a public service and do not imply endorsement by the State of Washington.

References for source materials are available from the Child and Adolescent Health program, 360-236-3547.

For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. Please call 1-800-525-0127.

**University of Washington** [www.washington.edu/admin/hr/worklife/parentingteens.html](http://www.washington.edu/admin/hr/worklife/parentingteens.html)  
Links to useful resources for parents of adolescents

**Parent Trust for Washington Children** 1-800-932-HOPE (4673); [www.parenttrust.org](http://www.parenttrust.org)

**Planned Parenthood** [www.plannedparenthood.org/teens/teentalk4.html](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/teens/teentalk4.html)  
“Facts of Life: A Guide for Teens and Their Families”

**Kids Health** [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)  
Age-appropriate material in separate sections for parents, teens and kids

**YMCA Parent & Teen Survey** [www.ymca.net/presrm/research/teensurvey.htm](http://www.ymca.net/presrm/research/teensurvey.htm)

**Washington State Department of Health** [www.doh.wa.gov/topics/teen\\_sex.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/topics/teen_sex.htm)  
“Talking with Teens About Sex”

**Washington State Healthy Youth Survey 2002** [www3.doh.wa.gov/HYS/](http://www3.doh.wa.gov/HYS/)



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# P R I N T I N G   S P E C I F I C A T I O N S

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"Talking with and Listening to Teens" Fact Sheet**

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